

Notes on Bhikkhunī Ordination

Hello :-) thank you for invitation to this nice discussion. The topic you talk about, Arthur, is more complicated than it might seem at the first sight. The first point that we may like to take into consideration, is that we are dealing here with Theravada - a tradition well known for its meticulous preservation of rules and meanings, and discarding as many "heretics" as possible. We would have free hands perhaps in Mahayana and so on, but in Theravada we are Theravada, not Mahayana. Just like a bird will flap with wings up and down - and not front to back - in Theravada we preserve the teachings meticulously, and do not try to "enhance" them. If you want enhancements, then perhaps Mahayana would be a better way to go ;-). This might be written by me, but it is believed by thousands of senior monks. Some people may pray that a sun doesn't rise in the morning - and what did they achieve? Nothing. The sun rose yet again. In the same way, you may pray that Theravada monks will start to "enhance" the teachings, and it will not help anything. A lot of times it's better to "let go", "accept what is as is", and see whether there is a solution that is in accordance with Dhamma, righteousness, and harmony. The more we let go, the clearer is our vision and understanding - and the better chance we have to find the most harmonious, wisest, and helpful solution as well.

Alright, so we have 40 books of Pāli scriptures, 50 books of Pāli Commentaries, and perhaps around 20 books of Sub-Commentaries (as for the version in Burmese script). I think this is a good amount of information, and perhaps we can find there some clue (!) :-). There is also a good amount of literature written about that topic in different languages and in different fields of research, such as history and sociology.

So, back to the question.. "Can bhikkhunīs be ordained today?" And the answer: "I don't know." But if you have some more free time, you can continue reading ;-).

The reason for "don't know" is, that the problem is double-sided, like a two-edged sword. Two-edged sword is quite dangerous, because whatever way you hit, there will be some damage.

In Theravada Buddhism there are three main layers of scriptures - *Mūla* (the original scripture), *Aṭṭhakathā* (the Commentaries) and *Ṭīkā* (the Sub-Commentaries). All of these three have to be closely followed, because they were written by great masters in the ancient times, who were closer to the Buddha in time, in culture, in mind-set, in attitude, in knowledge, in life-style, etc. etc. than we are. (Would you believe that they didn't have iPhones and laptops, no Google, no electricity?!) That's why Commentaries and Sub-Commentaries are taken very seriously by the educated monks in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and elsewhere. It is however exactly those scriptures where we find most problems. But again - Theravada preserves the original teachings, right? Or at least tries as much as it can!!

So, we have the story about bhikkhunīs in *Mahāvagga*. The parallel in *Āṅguttara Nikāya* is irrelevant, because *Āṅguttara Nikāya* is not binding monks and nuns in their life. It is *Vinaya Piṭaka* which is binding. If the allowance of the bhikkhunī ordination was contained only in *Āṅguttara Nikāya*, or if the consequent allowance to ordain them by *ubhato-sangha* (i.e. monks & nuns) was only in AN, the problem would be much easier. So, we have the problem in *Vinaya Piṭaka*, and thus in the relevant Commentaries and Sub-Commentaries, explained and elaborated here and there, in various ways. And again, it is only *Vinaya Piṭaka* which counts, suttas are stories for converting and enlightening people, not for preservation of the monastic community. You would perhaps realize that if you saw that there are no "offence" declarations in suttas, whereas in Vinaya there are over ninety-billion. Little rules are

essential for preserving the harmony of monastic community, and that's yet another reason why a conclusion that "please don't ordain" cannot be rescinded. The confusion arises when we find out that "please don't ordain bhikkhunīs" is not contained in ANY Pāḷi scripture whatsoever, even in the Sub-Commentaries of which some are believed to be composed long long after Burmese and Sri Lankan bhikkhunīs (reportedly) disappeared. They didn't disappear, they were available in Thailand. In Thailand they were prohibited by the king, because both nuns and monks were apparently too beautiful to avoid preservation of their genes... Ok! That's the nature. Monks and nuns together, that means the destruction of the Buddha's teachings - thought the king! And that's why he prohibited bhikkhunīs, and that's how they gradually disappeared there. Perhaps if you were a Thai king at that time you would be happy how the things were ... ? Or maybe you would solve it better! :-)

Now as for me, I don't have a problem if there are bhikkhunīs or not, because we have one anyway in Czech Republic, and she does great service for the Czech community. It would be better if I could believe her that she is bhikkhunī, so that we can live in peace and harmony for ever after. The difficulty is, that I am responsible for my actions, and I want to do actions which will help preservation of Theravāda, the special Buddhist school which is special by the fact that it preserves its teachings.

So, if you are still with me, perhaps I can reveal to you where I have the two main problems related to the scriptural account. :-) .

The main problem, at this point of my research, is in interpretation of Commentaries and another one of a single sentence in the Sub-Commentaries.

1. We know (from the *Vinaya Piṭaka*, of course!) that dear Mahāpajāpati Gotamī was ordained simply by the Buddha's decision - if she accepts the eight *garudhammās* (the challenging rules to preserve harmony and safety of nuns), that itself would be her ordination. She accepted them joyfully and right away!! Well, but what about the other 500 princesses (or royal ladies) who came with her? The Buddha said that monks will ordain those princesses (I like to think they were all princesses.). BUT! The commentary explains, that they took as their preceptor (teacher) Mahāpajāpati Gotamī! And that's exactly where I get destroyed. Today, when the original lineage of Theravāda(!) bhikkhunīs is not preserved, we have nobody who would do their "preceptor", like Mahāpajāpati did. Without a preceptor, how would the ordination look like? So, I have no solution for this (so far). By the way, the reason why Chinese bhikkhunīs are no more Theravāda - even though they follow "Theravāda" Vinaya - is because their Commentarial scriptures are different, hence their ordination halls are different, and consequently invalid. By invalid ordination hall the ordination itself is invalid. (E.g. they use brick walls as the borders for ordination hall, although Theravāda *Vinaya* specifically prohibits walls for ordination hall.) That's why the Chinese, Korean etc. bhikkhunīs will never be accepted as Theravāda bhikkhunīs even if they have the same Mūla (original) Vinaya as Theravāda has. So, this is the problem number one which I have and which I couldn't solve so far. Maybe you can! :-)

2. The Sub-Commentaries say, that "there are no bhikkhunīs apart from those coming from the lineage started by the Buddha". This can be interpreted in two ways - a) referring to past, present, and future (i.e. if bhikkhunīs die out, there is no way to make new bhikkhunīs of a new lineage), b) referring to past only, meaning that of course in the Buddha's time only bhikkhunīs coming from Mahāpajāpati Gotamī were legitimate. It would however not be related to a future case when the lineage would disappear. -- The Burmese Pāḷi grammarians explain, that the case a) is correct, and never mention that b) could be the case. (So I feel I should learn some more Pāḷi grammar.. :-)).

The generally accepted reason for ordaining bhikkhunīs is, that the Buddha first allowed "monks" to ordain bhikkhunīs (however ven. Sujāto et al. will NEVER EVER mention the commentarial gloss that Mahāpajāpati Gotamī was their preceptor!!), and then the Buddha decided that bhikkhunīs will also participate in the ordination of bhikkhunīs. The previous permission that monks (only) will ordain bhikkhunīs was not cancelled by the Buddha, and the rationale is, that it was not cancelled for the cases such as we have today - when no original bhikkhunīs to turn up at the ordination are available. The support for this idea comes from the declaration of ordination for monks. First the Buddha allowed to ordain monks just by having the adept recite the three refuges (Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha), and then later the Buddha decided that the ordination will be done in a specific place, in presence of a specific number of monks, with recitation of specific words of decision. At that time, however, the Buddha cancelled the previous permission to ordain by three refuges ... so, why did He do it? And why didn't He cancel bhikkhu's ordination of bhikkhunīs? So, that's the reason why you have bhikkhunī ordinations in Sri Lanka and Australia. Simply because the Buddha "didn't prohibit" it.

Does it make more sense now? To me it makes sense only if I was not a Theravada monk and didn't try to preserve whatever dwindling truth we still have in the scriptures. I believe that for you, who doesn't bear the responsibility, it is easy to advice centenarian super-elder-masters, Arahants, kings, and perhaps you'd like to give an advice to the Buddha as well. Please, do it for us. We will then have a lot of peace, if you succeed :-).

The presence of sayalays, silmātās and maykyyees was not known in the olden times. In fact, the status of eight-precept or ten-precept nuns was developed later to allow women a renunciant life in Theravada, and still avoid development of confusion in the Theravada society, I mean confusion related to the Vinaya prescription. By the Pāli scriptures ten-precept laity is allowed. Thus the precept nuns are allowed in terms of laity, they are not nuns, and they are not considered to be - although lay people consider them as "nuns" (i.e. not lay people), which was exactly the reason for instituting this solution. There were Non-returner and Arahant precept-nuns in the past. Now in the present I am not aware of a single Non-Returner or Arahant bhikkhunī since the "new lineage" started, but that of course doesn't mean there would be none. What I mean is, that if ladies want to serve community and become enlightened, they have an appropriate solution - which was made for them by the monks themselves. The fact that Theravada monks try to preserve whatever remains of the Buddha's teachings is either attractive or repulsive, and that's the nature of things. Some people loved the Buddha and some hated Him. I think that's just the way it is, right? :-) But if you can do with it something, please, do. We will have a lot of peace then :-).

Hope this helped! :-)

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